

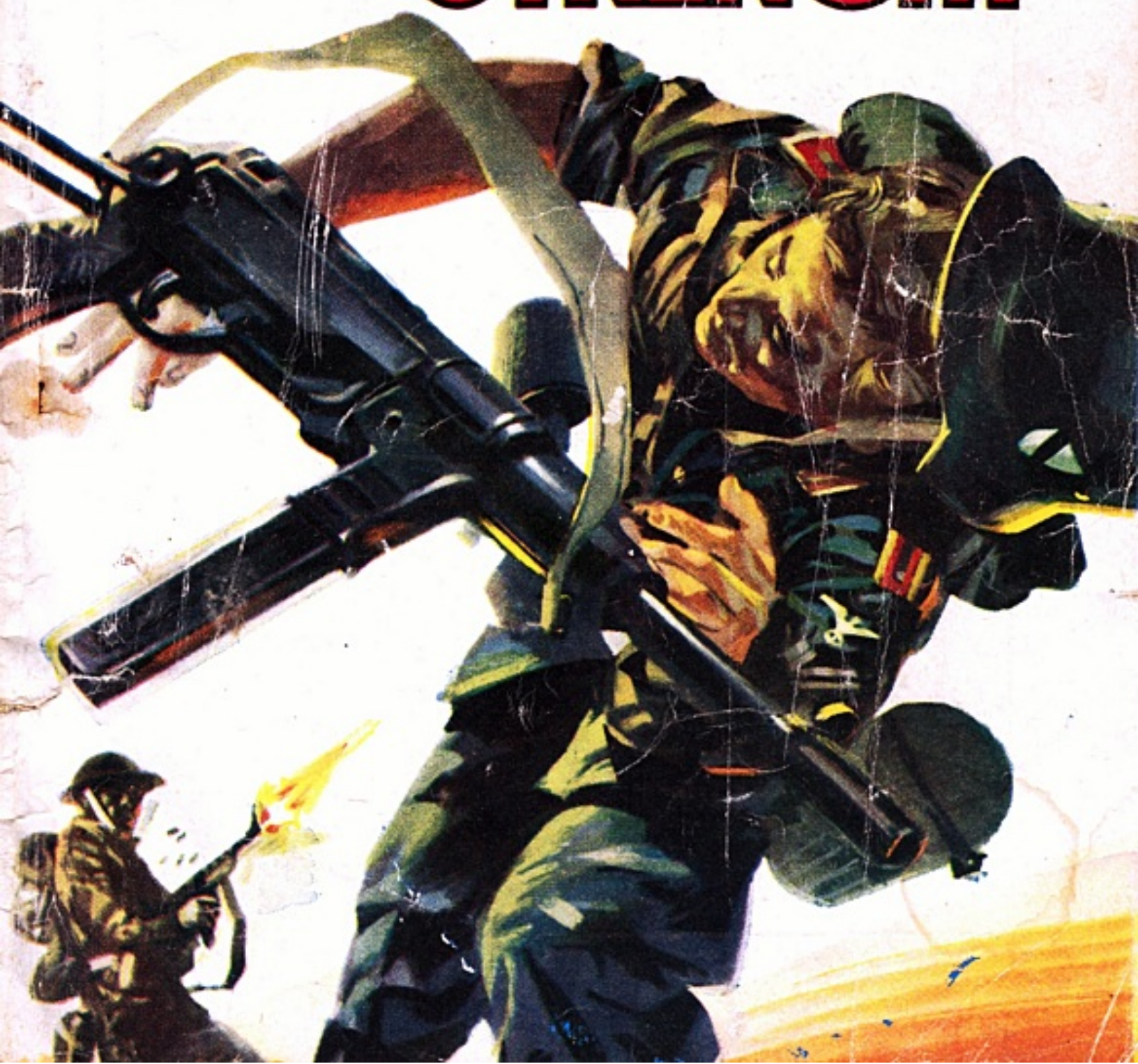
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TOWER OF STRENGTH



4

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TOWER OF STRENGTH

ARMY RECRUITING OFFICE

LOYALTY CAN BE A DANGEROUS VIRTUE. WHETHER IT BE A REGIMENT'S LOYALTY TO ITS COMMANDER, A SOLDIER'S LOYALTY TO HIS REGIMENT, OR SIMPLY ONE MAN'S LOYALTY TO ANOTHER -- IT INVARIABLY CALLS FOR SACRIFICE.



FOR GENERATIONS THE PERKINS HAD SERVED THE HOUSE OF CLAREMONT, AND WHEN YOUNG SIR FRANCIS CLAREMONT WENT TO WAR, NATURALLY ALBERT PERKINS ACCOMPANIED HIM.

Chapter 1. *The Hot Potato*

IT SEEMED IN THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS THAT BECAUSE HE WAS BUTLER/VALET TO SIR FRANCIS CLAREMONT, PERKINS BECAME BATMAN TO MAJOR CLAREMONT OF THE 5TH BATTALION OF THE DARTSHIRES.

TEA, FRANCIS?

NO, THANKS, OLD BOY. MY MAN USUALLY DISHES MINE UP ABOUT THIS TIME. CHINA LEAF. HE HAS IT SENT FROM HOME.

THROUGH THE SEE-SAW DESERT BATTLES, THROUGH SICILY AND INTO ITALY, PERKINS HAD SUCCESSFULLY HIDDEN THE TRAINED SOLDIER BENEATH THE VENEER OF HIS CIVILIAN PROFESSION.

YOUR TEA, SIR FRANCIS. I AM AFRAID THIS IS THE LAST OF THE ARROWROOT BISCUITS, UNTIL THE NEXT MAIL ARRIVES, SIR.

THANK YOU, PERKINS. WE MUST TRY TO BEAR UP IF THE WORST OCCURS.

Tower of Strength

3

PERKINS WITHDREW AS INCONSPICUOUSLY AS HE HAD APPEARED, LEAVING AT LEAST ONE NEWLY-JOINED CAPTAIN STARING IN BEWILDERMENT.

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! NOT HERE -- IN THE MIDDLE OF A WAR!

MY DEAR CHAP, IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN A WAR TO FLUSTER PERKINS. HE IS A TOWER OF STRENGTH.



PRIVATE PERKINS TOOK THE WAR COOLLY AND CALMLY IN HIS STRIDE. WHEN THE DARTSHIRES WERE IN THE THICK OF THE FRAY REPULSING A GERMAN ATTACK, ONE GOT THE IMPRESSION HE WAS BACK ON THE GROUSE MOOR, AT HIS MASTER'S SHOOTING PARTY...

YOUR SECOND GUN, SIR. MIGHT I SUGGEST YOU ALLOW MORE FOR WIND? ABOUT ONE DEGREE, SIR?

YOU'RE RIGHT, PERKINS.



Tower of Strength

THE CAPTAIN WAS IMPRESSED. BORN AND BRED IN THE CITY, HE HAD YET TO SEE A FAITHFUL FAMILY RETAINER OF THE OLD SCHOOL IN ACTION.

I SUPPOSE HE
DISAPPROVES OF YOU
SHOOTING SITTING
BIRDS?

I THINK HE
PREFERS THEM ON
THE RUN ... LIKE
THAT ONE!

GOOD SHOT,
SIR! THAT'S A
COUPLE OF BRACE
THIS MORNING!

BY NIGHTFALL, THE ATTACK HAD DIED AWAY AND THE FRONT WAS QUIET, EXCEPT FOR PATROL ACTIVITY ON BOTH SIDES.

THE SERGEANT-MAJOR SENDS
HIS COMPLIMENTS, SIR. HE IS OF
THE OPINION THAT A GERMAN
PATROL IS WORKING IN FROM
THE WEST FLANK.

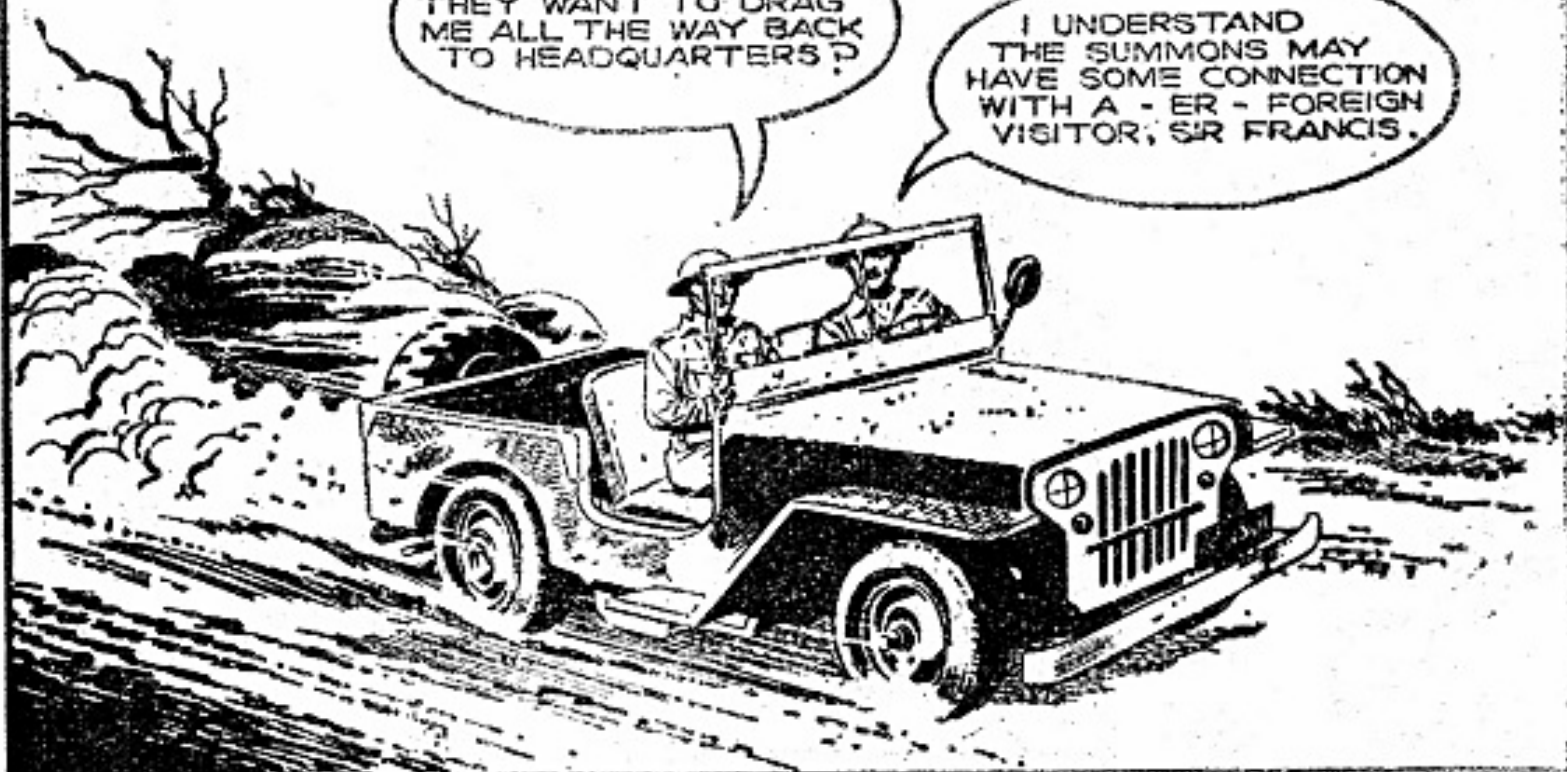
THE DEVIL HE
IS! TURN OUT
'A' PLATOON!

THE PLATOON
COMMANDER IS
ALREADY AWAITING
YOUR INSTRUCTIONS,
SIR.

PERKINS ARRANGED EVERYTHING AND WHAT MAJOR SIR FRANCIS CLAREMONT WOULD HAVE DONE WITHOUT HIS GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN HE SHUDDERED TO THINK. NEXT DAY...

NOW WHY WOULD THEY WANT TO DRAG ME ALL THE WAY BACK TO HEADQUARTERS?

I UNDERSTAND THE SUMMONS MAY HAVE SOME CONNECTION WITH A - ER - FOREIGN VISITOR, SIR FRANCIS.



CLAREMONT HAD LONG LOST THE ABILITY TO BE ASTONISHED BY HIS MAN...

THE INFORMATION CAME VIA THE RATION TRUCK DRIVER TO THE C.Q.M.S. TO THE STOREMAN TO ME, SIR. IT WAS NOT AMPLIFIED, I AM AFRAID.

TELL ME MORE, PERKINS...



IT WAS THE COLONEL BACK AT H.Q. WHO FILLED IN THE BLANKS. HE HAD THE AIR OF A MAN WHO WAS HANDLING A HOT POTATO AND ITCHING TO GET RID OF IT.

FRANCIS! THANK HEAVEN YOU'VE COME! I'VE GOT A RUSSIAN SITTING IN MY LAP AND I SHOULD HATE TO DROP HIM!



IT APPEARED THAT A RUSSIAN ARMY OBSERVER HAD BEEN LOADED ON BRIGADE AND WAS RAPIDLY BEING UNLOADED ON TO THE DARTSHIRES.

NO SITTING BACK COMFORTABLY AT H.Q. FOR *THIS* CHAP! HE INSISTS ON A TOUR OF THE FRONT LINE. SEEMS HE WAS AT STALINGRAD. ANYTHING ELSE WILL SEEM LIKE A CROQUET MATCH, I GATHER.



COLONEL ROKOVSKY WAS GETTING IMPATIENT. IT WAS THE FIGHTING HE HAD TRAVELLED ALL THIS WAY TO SEE. IN MOSCOW THEY WOULD BE WAITING FOR HIS REPORT.

COLONEL BARKER! HOW LONG WILL IT BE I STAY HERE? MY ORDERS ARE TO STUDY THE FRONT LINE!

CERTAINLY, COLONEL ROKOVSKY! HERE IS MAJOR CLAREMONT. HE IS TO CONDUCT YOU WHEREVER YOU WANT TO GO.



CLAREMONT GULPED... IF THIS STALINGRAD HERO GOT HIMSELF KILLED IN A SKIRMISH IN ITALY, IT COULD CAUSE AN INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT!

DELIGHTED TO HAVE THE HONOUR, COLONEL. IF YOU WILL GET YOUR KIT, WE WILL GO RIGHT AWAY.

KIT? I HAVE NO KIT. I TRAVEL LIGHT. WE WILL GO, PLEASE.



THE BRITISH OFFICER VOICED HIS ANXIETY TO HIS C.O.

EVEN THE WAY BACK IS TRICKY, SIR! THE ROAD IS MINED. LEND ME ANOTHER JEEP, WILL YOU? I'LL GO AHEAD - JUST IN CASE!

OKAY, AND - FRANCIS - BRING HIM BACK ALIVE - OR ELSE -!



HE EXPLAINED THE NEED OF TWO JEEPS TO THE RUSSIAN, WHO SHRUGGED HIS SHOULDERS. WHO CARED FOR MINES AFTER BEING IN STALINGRAD?

PERKINS, I AM RELYING ON YOU. DRIVE AS IF IT WAS A HEARSE.

OF COURSE, SIR FRANCIS. OUR GUEST, I AM SURE, WILL HAVE LITTLE CAUSE FOR COMPLAINT.



THE TWO JEEPS HEADED FOR A FRONT LINE THAT WAS FLUCTUATING VIOLENTLY ALREADY, ON ONE FLANK, THE GERMANS HAD BROKEN THROUGH.

ACHTUNG! ENGLANDERS!
STEBLING, DOUBLE DOWN
THE HILL. USE
GRENADES!



CLAREMONT GAVE A CRY OF HORROR AS THE FIRST GRENADE HIT THE ROAD BEHIND HIM AND THE WHINE OF BULLETS FOLLOWED UP THE ROAR OF THE EXPLOSION.

GOOD GRIEF!
JERRIES!



THE RUSSIAN HAD BEEN STARTLED, TOO, AS THE GRENADE HIT THE ROAD IN FRONT OF THEM. THOUGH HE WOULD HAVE DIED TO ADMIT IT, THOSE WEEKS AT STALINGRAD HAD FRAYED HIS NERVES SOMEWHAT.

TSCH! WE ARE THERE? ALREADY?
WHY WAS I NOT WARNED?

IT APPEARS THE ENEMY HAVE TAKEN SOME LIBERTIES, SIR. WITH YOUR PERMISSION, WE WILL TAKE THE SIDE ROAD.

PERKINS SWUNG THE WHEEL OVER AND DROVE HARD AND FAST ALONG THE NARROW SIDE ROAD. THE GERMANS TRIED LONG SHOTS, BUT THEY WERE ON FOOT AND SOON OUT OF RANGE.

PAH! EVEN HERE THEY CANNOT SHOOT STRAIGHT! BUT THE ENGLISH SHOULD NOT HAVE LET THEM ROAM FREELY TO ATTACK WITHOUT WARNING!

QUITE, SIR. THOUGH DOUBTLESS OUR PEOPLE WERE NOT AWARE OF THE ENEMY'S INTENTIONS.



HE HAD LOST SIR FRANCIS, BUT THERE WAS NO POINT IN GOING BACK TO TANGLE WITH THE GERMANS. HE EXPLAINED HIS DILEMMA TO THE V.I.P. GUEST.

MAJOR CLAREMONT, I AM SURE, WILL HAVE EVADED DESTRUCTION, SIR. IF WE CONTINUE ON THIS ROAD,

AS YOU WISH, I DO NOT LIKE THIS COUNTRY. ON THE STEPPES IT IS BETTER!

IT IS POSSIBLE WE WILL MEET HIM AGAIN IN THE COMPANY LINES.

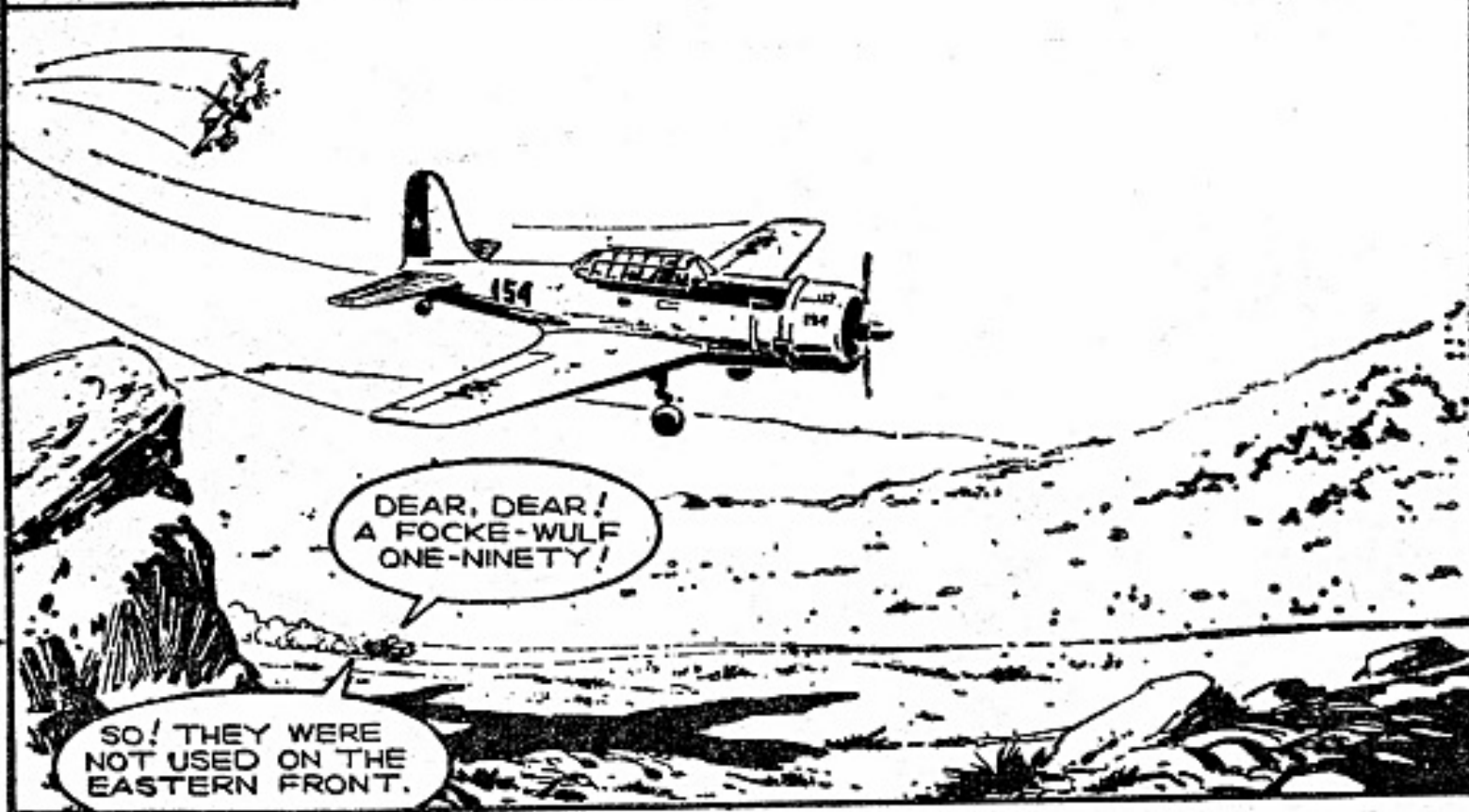


AT THAT MOMENT, ANOTHER QUARRY WAS BEING HOUNDED. THIS TIME IN THE SKY. COLONEL "KING" CALLAHAN, OF THE U.S. ARMY AIR FORCE HAD BEEN VISITING A UNIT IN HIS PERSONAL LIGHT PLANE, WHEN IT HAPPENED.

HELL'S BELLS!
A KRAUT
FIGHTER!



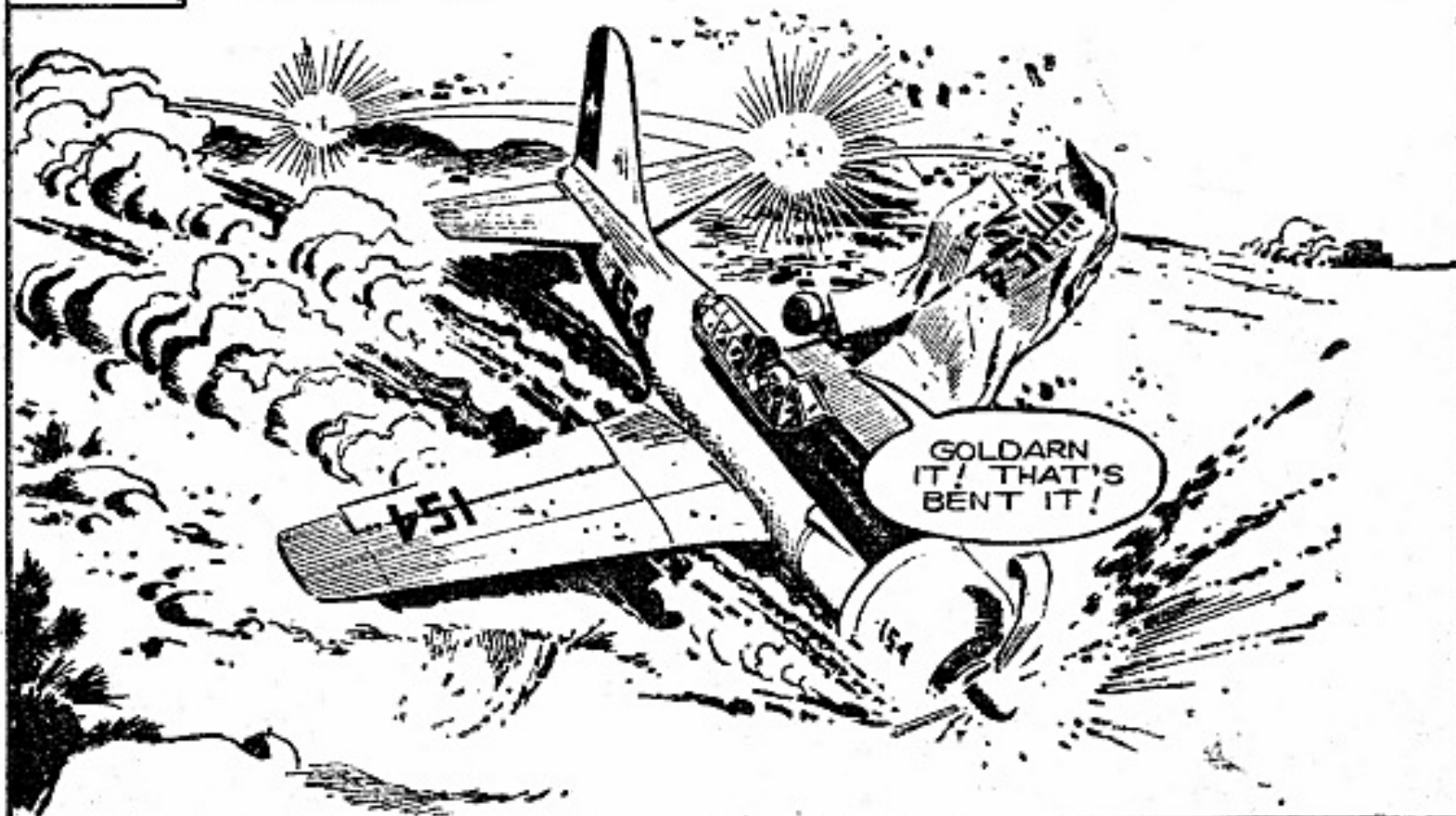
DESPERATELY, HE FLUNG HIS UNARMED PLANE TOWARDS THE FLOOR OF THE VALLEY. AT THE SOUND OF THE GERMAN FIGHTER'S CANNON FIRE, PERKINS LOOKED UP. ANXIOUSLY...



DEAR, DEAR!
A FOCKE-WULF
ONE-NINETY!

SO! THEY WERE
NOT USED ON THE
EASTERN FRONT.

IN HIS EFFORT TO MAKE THE F.W. 190 OVERSHOOT HIM, "KING" CALLAHAN MISJUDGED HIS PLANE'S SPEED. IT PROMPTLY STALLED AND STOOD ON ITS NOSE ...



THE F.W. 190 HAD ZOOMED UP AND AWAY BY THE TIME PERKINS AND COLONEL ROKOVSKY REACHED THE WRECK AND CALLAHAN HAD STRUGGLED FREE. ONLY HIS TEMPER HAD SUFFERED.

YOU WALL-EYED, SON-OF-A-SHEEP DROVER! GIVE ME A MUSTANG AND I'LL SINGE YOUR BREECHES, BUSTER!

SIR, IT IS GRATIFYING TO SEE YOU ARE, AT LEAST, UNINJURED.



THEY FOUND ROOM FOR THE AMERICAN COLONEL IN THE BACK OF THE JEEP AND DROVE ON. THE QUICK-TEMPERED TEXAN HAD COOLED DOWN AT MEETING HIS FIRST RUSSIAN.

GEE! IT'S A GREAT KICK TO MEET ONE OF YOU GUYS, COLONEL! I SURE ADMIRE THE WAY YOU'RE KICKING BACK AT THE KRAUTS.



ROKOVSKY THREW THE FRIENDLY GESTURE BACK IN HIS FACE!

THAT IS INTERESTING BUT WHY DO NOT THE AMERICANS START THE SECOND FRONT? ARE THEY AFRAID?

WHY... YOU BIG-MOUTHED PALOOKA! I'LL



A VICE-LIKE GRIP ON HIS WRIST STOPPED CALLAHAN'S FIST IN MID-AIR. PERKINS' VOICE WAS RESPECTFUL ... BUT FIRM.

YOUR WATCH, SIR. I THINK THE STRAP IS COMING LOOSE.



THEY TRAVELLED ON FOR MILES IN SILENCE AND ALL THE TIME, THOUGH THEY DID NOT KNOW IT, THEY WERE BEHIND THE ENEMY LINES. IN FACT, THE NEAREST ENEMY WAS TRAVELLING BEHIND THEM ON THE SAME ROAD!

I STILL FAIL TO SEE WHY I HAVE TO TAKE YOU ON MY RECONNAISSANCE, COLONEL.

I TELL YOU. I KNOW THIS DISTRICT WELL, OBERST VON STEISSEN. I HAVE A CHATEAU IN THESE VERY HILLS.



THERE WAS NO LOVE LOST BETWEEN THE TWO ALLIES, THE GERMAN AND THE ITALIAN, COLONEL COUNT COTRONIO.

HERR OBERST! AN ENGLISH JEEP ON THE ROAD -- AHEAD!

HALT, FOOL! THERE IS SOMEONE IN IT!



PERKINS HAD FINALLY ADMITTED HE WAS LOST, WITH APOLOGIES TO HIS PASSENGERS, HE HAD GONE TO A SMALL MOUNTAIN COTTAGE TO MAKE ENQUIRIES. THAT WAS WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED ...

GET YOUR HEAD DOWN, RUSSKY!
AND GRAB THAT GUN!



UNARMED, PERKINS COULD DO NOTHING BUT WATCH THE SHOOTING MATCH. THE TEXAN, INDEED, SEEMED TO BE ENJOYING HIMSELF ...

GOT HIM! THAT'S
ANOTHER NICK ON THE
BUTT! HAVING FUN,
RUSSKY?

MY NAME IS
COLONEL ROKOVSKY.
PLEASE USE IT!
AH ... THIS IS A
GOOD GUN!



THE RUSSIAN HANDLED THE STEN-GUN LIKE A VETERAN. AS ONE OF THE GERMANS LEAPT FOR COVER, IT WAS ROKOVSKY WHO CLIPPED HIS WINGS.



BUT THE WILY VON STEISSEN HAD OUTFLANKED THEM AND AS THE STEN CEASED ITS CHATTERING, HE POUNCED ...



THE FACT THAT HE COULD NOW HIDE AND ESCAPE DID NOT EVEN STRIKE PERKINS. SIR FRANCIS HAD PLACED THE RUSSIAN COLONEL IN HIS CHARGE -- THAT WAS ALL THERE WAS TO IT...

ACH!
ANOTHER ONE!
WHO ARE YOU?

PRIVATE PERKINS, SIR.
I AM SERVANT TO THE
RUSSIAN COLONEL. IF YOU
CAPTURE HIM -- YOU MUST
CAPTURE ME, TOO.

THE AXIS COLONELS WERE DELIGHTED BY THEIR BAG.

BUONA! IL DUCE WILL
DECORATE ME WITH THE SILVER
ORDER OF GARIBALDI WHEN
I HAND OVER THIS RUSSIAN!

FOOL! HE IS MY
PRISONER! I WILL HAVE
HIM FLOWN BACK TO
BERLIN. MEIN FUHRER
WILL ADD THE KNIGHT'S
LAUREL LEAVES IN
DIAMONDS TO MY
IRON CROSS!

PERKINS INTERRUPTED POLITELY.

WITH RESPECT, GENTLEMEN, MIGHT I SUGGEST THAT WE WILL HAVE TO BE HANDED OVER TO THE NEXT UNIT WE COME TO. IF IT IS GERMAN -- OR IF IT IS ITALIAN -- THAT WILL SETTLE THE MATTER.



GRUDGINGLY, THEY AGREED. HAVING DISPOSED OF THEIR CASUALTIES, VON STEISSEN MADE CALLAHAN DRIVE THE STAFF CAR, AND PERKINS GOT INTO THE JEEP WITH COLONEL COUNT COTRONIO.

IT IS NOT FAIR, VON STEISSEN! YOU HAVE THE SUPERIOR PRISONERS!

AND WHY NOT? IT IS MY CAR! DRIVE ON, AMERICAN!



AS THE TWO VEHICLES HEADED UP INTO THE MOUNTAINS, THERE WAS A STRAINED SILENCE, AS EACH MAN WAS BUSY WITH HIS THOUGHTS -- REHEARSING!

QUITE, SIR FRANCIS -- BUT AFTER ALL, HE SPENT A SAFE WAR IN THE P.O.W. CAMP!



OH, NO, COMRADE STALIN! NOT THE SALT MINES AGAIN!



GEE, YOU GUYS -- I KNOW I WON A HEAP O' DOUGH AT THAT POKER GAME, BUT I GOT CAUGHT THE DAY AFTER... HONEST!

JA, MEIN FUEHRER -- ALONE I CAPTURED THEM! THE LAUREL LEAVES? DANKE, MEIN FUEHRER!



PROMOTED GENERAL! IT IS TOO MUCH, DUCE MIO! BUT NATURALLY, I ACCEPT!



Chapter 2. *Strange Allies*

BEFORE THE WAR, THOSE MOUNTAINS HAD BEEN THE HAUNT OF CUT-THROAT BANDITS, USUALLY EX-JAILBIRDS. THE WAR HAD THINNED THEM OUT, BUT SOME REMAINED.

TEDESCHI! INGLES! IT MATTERS NOT! THEY HAVE WEAPONS WE NEED. TO ACTION!



IL TURCO ---THE TURK---LED A GANG OF BANDITS FOR WHOM THE WAR HAD BEEN A BLESSING. LOOT, WEAPONS AND VEHICLES DROPPED LIKE MANNA FROM HEAVEN INTO THEIR GREEDY HANDS.

SCATTER, YOU POLTROONS! VESPUCCI, GET TO THE DYNAMITE!

Sì, sì!



THE BANDITS RARELY WASTED AMMUNITION, THOUGH THEY HAD A LARGE AND VARIED COLLECTION. THEY TRIED A TEAR-GAS BOMB FIRST...



WITH THEIR EYES STREAMING, THE FOUR COLONELS AND PERKINS WERE ALREADY AT A DISADVANTAGE. WHEN BIG AMBROSIO, THE MARKSMAN OF THE BANDITTI, TRIED SOME PLAIN AND FANCY SHOOTING.



Tower of Strength

BOVINO HAD ONCE BEEN A BOMBARDIER WITH THE ITALIAN AIR FORCE -- AND HE LIKED TO KEEP HIS HAND IN. HE MADE HIS OWN BOMBS FROM PASTA, MACARONI DOUGH.



COME, LITTLE
ONES! PAPA BOVINO
WELCOMES YOU!

THE TEARS STILL TRICKLED DOWN
THE CHEEKS OF COLONEL COUNT
COTRONIO, WHETHER FROM THE
TEAR GAS OR DEEP EMOTION IT
WAS DIFFICULT TO TELL!

THESE ARE MY POOR
PEOPLE! WHEN THEY SEE
IT IS I WHOM THEY ATTACK,
THEY WILL CEASE...



IT WAS TOUCHING, THE FAITH HE HAD IN
HIS COMPATRIOTS. BUT THE TARGET HE
PRESENTED WAS TOO MUCH FOR PAPA
BOVINO!

THEY LOVE
ME AS A
FATHER...
OUCH!



VON STEISSEN WAS LIVID. FROM LIEUTENANT TO COLONEL IN FOUR YEARS -- THE ONLY MAN IN THE GERMAN ARMY TO CAPTURE A RUSSIAN OFFICER IN ITALY -- TO BE KILLED BY AN UNKNOWN PEASANT!

DRIVE FAST,
AMERICAN!
**SCHNELL!
SCHNELL!**

NO! WE STAND
AND FIGHT! GIVE
ME A GUN!

OH, CUT THE
MALARKY! LET'S
GET TO HECK
OUTA HERE!



COUNT COTRONIO HAD WIPED THE PASTA FROM HIS FACE BUT NOT THE SLUR FROM HIS DIGNITY.

THEY DO NOT
RECOGNISE ME.
THEY DO NOT KNOW
IT IS COUNT
COTRONIO!

I AM SURE THEY
DON'T, SIR. NOW HOLD
TIGHT, YOUR
EXCELLENCY...



Tower of Strength

THE TWO VEHICLES ACCELERATED VIOLENTLY ALONG THE MOUNTAIN ROAD, FORCING IL TURCO TO TAKE STRONGER MEASURES.

QUIT THE FOOLING, BAMBINI! IF THEY WANT IT THE HARD WAY, GIVE IT TO THEM. **FIRE!**



VESPUCCI, THE EXPLOSIVE EXPERT, WAS IN RESERVE. TOO MANY VICTIMS SURRENDERED BEFORE THEY CAME TO HIS LAST LINE OF DEFENCE BUT THIS LOOKED LIKE BEING HIS DAY!

VESPUCCI! VESPUCCI!
BLOW UP THE ROCK!

SI, SI,
CAPITANO!
AT ONCE!



THE FUSE WAS TOO LONG, THE BLAST TOO LATE TO CATCH THE STAFF CAR. KING CALLAHAN WAS DRIVING WITH TEXAN ABANDON, WITH PERICONS, IT WAS TOUCH AND GO. THE INSTANT DECISION HE MADE SHOWED THE MAN BENEATH THE GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN!



THE OVERHANGING ROCK TEETERED, THEN CAME SMASHING DOWN ON TO THE ROADWAY WHILE OTHERS HURTTLED OVER THEIR HEADS.

YOU MAY LOOK NOW, YOUR EXCELLENCY. THE WORST IS OVER, I THINK.

IT TOOK THE COMBINED EFFORT OF FOUR COLONELS AND A PRIVATE SOLDIER TO MAN-HANDLE THE BOULDER OFF THE ROAD. THE DELAY GAVE THE BANDITS TIME TO RE-GROUP.

WATCH IT! THOSE BABIES ARE BUNCHING FOR ANOTHER ATTACK!

I WILL SPEAK TO THEM! THEY WILL LISTEN TO ME!

PAH! THEY LISTEN ONLY TO BULLETS! LET US FIGHT!

THEY SCRAMBLED BACK INTO THE VEHICLES, AMID A SHOWER OF WILDLY-AIMED BULLETS. YET THE DANGER WAS VERY REAL, FOR THE BANDITS HAD A BREN GUN.

WHAT DO YOU RECKON TO THAT P KRAUT AND RUSSO ON THE SAME SIDE!

MOST INTERESTING, SIR... BUT SHOULDN'T WE MOVE ON P SUPERIOR FORCES, I THINK.

IF THEY WOULD ONLY LISTEN TO ME!

STRANGELY UNITED AGAINST THE COMMON DANGER, AXIS AND ALLIES FOUGHT A REARGUARD BATTLE, VON STEISSEN AND ROKOVSKY KEEPING THE ATTACKERS AT BAY UNTIL PERKINS GOT THE UNHAPPY ITALIAN INTO THE JEEP.

DRIVE ON!

AT STALINGRAD WE DID NOT RUN!

LISTEN, BUSTER! IT WAS SNOWING THERE! IF THEY GET THAT MACHINE GUN WORKING, IT'S CURTAINS FOR US!



LUCK WAS STILL WITH THEM AS THEY RACED FOR THE BEND IN THE ROAD. THEY WERE ROUND IT BEFORE THE BREN WAS ON ITS TRIPOD.



IT WAS THE QUIET MAN DRIVING THE JEEP WHO MADE THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS SUGGESTION IN HIS MATTER-OF-FACT TONES.



TO KING CALLAHAN'S AMAZEMENT, PERKINS NODDED AT THE SARCASTIC SUGGESTION.

EXACTLY, SIR. PLEASE ARRANGE TO DRIVE AWAY IF AND WHEN I GET BACK. I SHALL SACRIFICE THE JEEP.



SWIFTLY HE TURNED THE JEEP. AROUND THE BEND, THE BANDIT'S WOULD BE MANNING THE BREN, WAITING FOR THE CARS TO APPEAR ON THE NEXT LEG OF THE ZIG-ZAG ROAD.

WAIT! I WILL COME WITH YOU! TOGETHER WE WILL DIE!

WITH RESPECT, SIR, IF THAT HAPPENED, I COULD NEVER FACE SIR FRANCIS AGAIN!



HE WENT ROUND THE CORNER IN SCREAMING SECOND GEAR, SLIPPED FROM THIRD TO TOP IN A FEW YARDS AND AIMED THE JEEP LIKE A WEAPON. YARDS FROM THE BREN, HE JUMPED CLEAR.

AIEEE! KILL HIM, FOOLS!

AEEGH!



HE RACED BACK TO THE ODDLY ASSORTED GROUP AND THEY COVERED THE NEXT DANGEROUS LAP IN THE STAFF CAR WITHOUT INCIDENT. THE BANDITS WERE TEMPORARILY OUTWITTED.

WHAT NOW, KRAUT?
AND DON'T WAVE THAT
LUGER AT ME AGAIN.
WE GOTTA STICK
TOGETHER NOW.

TO MY MOUNTAIN
CHATEAU! MY COMPATRIOTS
WILL NOT ATTACK US
THERE.



EAGERLY, COLONEL COUNT COTRONIO DESCRIBED HIS PLEASANT PRE-WAR SUMMER RETREAT OF SAN CASTELLO.

BEFORE THE WAR
I WAS PATRON TO
THE MOUNTAIN
PEOPLE. I HAVE LEFT
MY TREASURES
THERE -- THEY
WILL BE SAFE.

AH, YES, I HAD THOUGHT OF
THAT! IN CASE THEIR LOYALTY TO
THE COTRONIOS BECAME STRAINED,
I HAD A PLATOON OF MY REGIMENT
BILLETED AT THE CHATEAU. AS
A PRECAUTION, EH?



SAFE? HOW
CAN ANYTHING BE SAFE
FROM THAT LOCAL
GANGSTER?



THE CHATEAU OF SAN CASTELLO, TWENTY KILOMETRES AWAY, WAS SPLENDID IN ITS ISOLATION, A TREASURE OF ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE -- AND APPARENTLY COMPLETELY DESERTED!

BUT MY SOLDIERS -- WHERE ARE THEY? THEY SHOULD BE HERE TO GREET ME?

MAYBE THEY TURNED BANDIT, TOO!

IT IS MORE THAN POSSIBLE THEY HAVE DESERTED!

THEY CLANGED THE BELL AND BATTERED ON THE DOOR. FINALLY, AFTER A SCRAPING OF BOLTS BEING DRAWN, THE GREAT DOOR CAME AJAR...

ENRICO! ENRICO DONOTI! YOU ARE STILL AT YOUR POST! WHERE ARE MY SOLDIERS?

AH, EXCELLENCY! THEY WERE NOT EXPECTING YOU. THEY WENT DOWN THE MOUNTAIN TO BELLESI.

PAH! WHAT AN ARMY!



BELLESSI WAS THE NEAREST VILLAGE, MANY KILOMETRES DOWN THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN.

WE WILL STAY
HERE! I - WE ALL -
NEED FOOD AND REST
AFTER A FIERCE
BATTLE WITH THE
BANDITS!

THE BANDITS?
BUT THEY ARE NOT
IN THIS AREA
EXCELLENCY!

THEN WE FOUGHT
FAIRIES! TELEPHONE TO
THE POLIZIA IN BELLESSI.
TELL THEM TO CHASE MY
SOLDIERS BACK HERE,
PRONTO!



AS ENRICO TELEPHONED TO THE POLICE AT BELLESSI, THE CEMENT OF COMMON DANGER WHICH HAD BOUND THE FOUR ILL-ASSORTED NATIONALS TOGETHER BURST ASUNDER...

COTRONIO! ENOUGH OF
THE FARCE! WE WILL
MOVE ON. I STILL HAVE
A RECONNAISSANCE
TO CARRY OUT!

QUIT GABBING,
VON -- WHATEVER
YOUR HANDLE IS!
WE'RE GOING
NOWHERE! WE
NEED GRUB.




VON STEISSEN CHOKED. TO BE TALKED AT LIKE THAT BY AN AMERICAN -- AND A PRISONER AT THAT!



THE MENACE IN ROKOVSKY'S VOICE THROBBED IN THE ROOM. IN IT WAS THE AGONY OF WAR IN TWENTY DEGREES OF FROST, THE HOLOCAUST OF STALINGRAD. THE BITTER, DEEP-SEATED HATRED OF THINGS GERMAN...




THEN THE GERMAN FELT THE PRESSURE OF THE MUZZLE HARD AGAINST HIS BACK, HEARD THE SOFT BUT STEEL-HARD WORDS IN HIS EAR.



WITH RESPECT, COLONEL,
IF YOU FIRE I WILL EMPTY
THIS REVOLVER INTO YOU.
THINK CAREFULLY... AND
PASS ME THE LUGER...
SIR.

HE DARE NOT GAMBLE WITH THE ODDS SO SHORT! ANGRILY, VON STEISSEN PASSED THE LUGER BEHIND HIM. THE MASK OF POLITENESS ON THE FACE OF PERKINS HAD NOT RELAXED.



I AM SURE YOU ARE ALL
TIRED AND HUNGRY, GENTLEMEN.
IF YOU WILL BE GOOD ENOUGH
TO FRESHEN UP IN THE
BEDROOMS, I WILL ENDEAVOUR
TO PROVIDE A MEAL.

HAH! A MEAL.
HE SAYS!

BUT IN THE LARGE KITCHEN OF THE CHATEAU, WHICH THE AGITATED ENRICO SHOWED HIM, PERKINS FOUND IT WAS NOT GOING TO BE EASY.

ENRICO, DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?

ENGLISH, I SPEAK, BUT GOOD! I WORK IN BROOKLYN, U.S.A., FOR TWO YEARS. BUT FOOD -- THERE IS NONE! NO FOOD IN THIS JOINT!

THEN WE'VE GOT TO FIND SOME. ARMY RATIONS? WHAT DID THE SOLDIERS EAT?

PAH! ISSUE SPAGHETTI, BEANS, TINS OF VEGETABLE, SLUDGE! BUT - WAIT - AT THE BACK THERE IS A CHICKEN OR TWO!

CHICKENS! LEAD THE WAY, ENRICO!

THEY STALKED THE FOWL WITH CUNNING. BUT THE CHICKENS WERE CUNNING, TOO -- AND SPEEDIER!

COME TO PAPA, LITTLE ONE!

CHUCK - CHUCK - CHUCK -



FINALLY, THREE CHICKENS SURRENDERED AND PERKINS GOT TO WORK. ENRICO BROUGHT UP TINS OF THE ITALIAN SOLDIERS' RATIONS AND INVESTIGATED THE WINE CELLAR.

SPAGHETTI, CHILI,
PASTA, FAGIOLI,
MUSHROOMS, CIPPOLLINE!
FINE... THESE WILL
DO FINE!

AND HERE IS THE WINE.
BEAUTIFUL CHIANTI, LIEBFRAUMILCH
FROM THE RHINE. RYE WHISKY
FROM BROOKLYN... AND... I WIN
THE JACKPOT... VODKA!



CAREFULLY, INTO THE BUBBLING POT, PERKINS
POURED A MEASURE OF EACH OF THE DRINKS.
ENRICO STOOD BACK NERVOUSLY...

MAMA MIA!
THAT IS A
DEVIL'S BREW!

I ALWAYS
BELIEVE A
LITTLE OF WHAT
YOU LIKE DOES
YOU GOOD.
ENRICO.



WITH THE HELP OF THE EAGER ITALIAN, HE LAID THE TABLE IN THE DINING ROOM, BRINGING TO THE TASI THE EXPERIENCED TOUCH OF AN ENGLISH BUTLER. ENRICO WAS ENTRANCED.



SAPRISTI! THE BROOKLYN HASH JOINT WHERE I SERVA THE ROUGHNECKS WAS NEVER LIKE THIS!

THE CANDLES, ENRICO! LIGHT THE CANDLES!



THE FOUR COLONELS HAD FRESHENED UP IN SEPARATE ROOMS, THEY WERE LIKE FOUR COCKERELS SPOILING FOR A FIGHT AS THEY ANSWERED PERKINS' GONG SIGNAL.

SO! THE ENGLISHMAN GIVES US SILVER SPOONS! FOR WHAT? FOR PIG'S FOOD!

WHY DON'T YOU STOP BREATHING, KRAUT?

FOR ME -- NOTHING! I DO NOT EAT WITH MY ENEMIES!

IN MY HOUSE, I DO NOT WISH YOU TO EAT, RUSSIAN BEAR!



FOR A MOMENT IT LOOKED AS IF THE WAR WOULD START AGAIN. THEN PERKINS' FIRM VOICE CUT IN.

GENTLEMEN! IF YOU WILL PLEASE SIT DOWN, I CAN COMMENCE SERVING.



EVEN THE RUSSIAN DID AS HE WAS TOLD. IT WAS ROKOVSKY THAT HE SERVED FIRST.

NO... I DO NOT EAT!

COLONEL... THIS IS ESPECIALLY FOR YOU... PAPAZJANIJA -- AND VODKA!



MAYBE IT WAS THE GURGLE OF THE VODKA, OR THE SOUND OF THE NAME OF THAT EASTERN DISH -- PAPAZJANIJA! A SLOW SMILE CREPT OVER ROKOVSKY'S FACE...

YOU SAY PAPAZJANIJA? FOR ME? THEN I WILL TRY -- JUST A LITTLE, COMRADE.



YES, SIR... JUST A LITTLE. ENRICO, THE VODKA.

MEN WHO HAD FORGOTTEN THE VERY TASTE OF FAVOURITE DISHES, MEN WHOSE PALATES HAD BECOME BLUNTED BY YEARS OF ARMY FOOD, COULD BE EASILY FOOLED.

FRIED CHICKEN
MARYLAND AND
BOURBON! SAY,
YOU'RE A MAGICIAN,
GOLDIER P JUST
PILE IT ON, BY
GOLLY!

YES, SIR.
I THOUGHT
YOU WOULD
APPRECIATE IT.

POLLO ARROSTO
CON CONTORNO DI
FUNGHI E PISELLI,
YOUR EXCELLENCY,
AND A FINE
CHIANTI!

MAGNIFICENT!
AH, BUT WHAT
A COOK!

DID YOU SAY
FRICASSEE VON
MASTHOHN MIT
CHAMPIGNONS UND
SPARGEL P

I DID, SIR. AND
A LIEBFRÄULEIN.



Tower of Strength

PERKINS' MAGIC AT THE STOVE, SUBTLY BLENDING THE MIXED ASSORTMENT OF FOOD HE HAD FOUND, HAD PRODUCED A DISH OF ENTRANCING MYSTERY. NERVES AND TEMPERERS WERE SMOOTHED AWAY ...

IN BROOKLYN IT WAS THE SAME! THEY RUSH IN YELLING THEIR HEADS OFF-- BUT AFTER A PLATEFUL OF RAVIOLI THEY COO LIKE DOVES!

SWELL! CAN'T BEAT THE OLD SOUTH FOR GOOD CHOW!

PAPAZJANJA! I HAD FORGOTTEN HOW DELICIOUS IT TASTES!



ALL WAS GOOD HUMOUR--EVEN GAY ABANDON! THE COUNT HAD DISCOVERED HIS OLD GUITAR AND THE GAY CHORDS SENT THEIR HEELS TAPPING ...

'TAKE YOUR PARTNER BY THE HAND AND SWING HER ROUND THE FASTEST IN THE LAND!' COME ON, SOLDIER-- JOIN IN!

IF YOU WILL EXCUSE ME, SIR. IT WOULD NOT BE SEEMLY...



IN THE KITCHEN, AS THEY ATE THEIR OWN MEAL, THEY COULD HEAR THE SOUNDS OF REVELRY FROM THE NEXT ROOM.

YOU KNOW, ENRICO, IT BEARS OUT A THEORY OF MINE! IF THEY GOT ALL THE LEADERS OF NATIONS ROUND A TABLE AND FED THEM PROPERLY, THERE WOULD BE NO WARS!

NOTHING BUT HAPPINESS, EH, SIGNORE?

HOW EASY TO SET THE WORLD AT RIGHTS! AS IF TO PROVE THE FALLACY OF THE PHILOSOPHY, THERE CAME AN ANGRY WORD, AN OATH... AND THE THUD OF A DAGGER SPLITTING THE WOOD OF THE DOOR.



THE EBULLIENT TEXAN HAD USED THE WORD "KRAUT" ONCE TOO OFTEN, VON STEISSEN'S GAIETY HAD SUDDENLY SOURED AND HIS SNEER AT CALLAHAN HAD BROUGHT FURTHER AMERICAN INSULTS. IN A FLASH HE HAD GRABBED A DAGGER FROM THE WALL.


STAND BACK! THIS SQUAREHEAD IS GOING TO MISS AGAIN! AIN'T YOU, KRAUT? YOU'RE YELLOW!

THIS TIME YOU WILL PAY, YANKEE! I WILL SHOW YOU WHO IS THE COWARD!



KING CALLAHAN, IN ONE LITHE MOVEMENT, TURNED AND LEAPT ON TO THE SIDEBOARD, SNATCHING A DAGGER FROM THE ORNATE PATTERN ON THE WALL.


OKAY, KRAUT! LET'S SEE WHO IS THE BETTER MAN!



IT LOOKED LIKE A FIGHT TO THE DEATH -- BUT IT WAS THE ITALIAN, COLONEL COUNT COTRONIO, WHO MOVED NEXT.

VON STEISSEN!
TAKE THE
SWORD!

YOU ITALIAN RAT!
YOU AND THE
COWARDLY GERMAN!
GIVE ME THAT
SWORD!



TO BE INSULTED IN HIS OWN HOUSE! THE ARISTOCRATIC COUNT SAW RED. HE HURLED A SWORD AT ROKOVSKY.

VERY WELL, UNCIVILISED SAVAGE! IF YOU HAVE THE COURAGE—THEN FIGHT THE FINEST SWORDSMAN IN THE SOUTH OF ITALY!

YOU HAVE SIGNED YOUR OWN DEATH WARRANT, ITALIAN!



IT LOOKED AS IF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP OF BIG BRASS WAS TO BE HALVED IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE, WHEN PERKINS CAME RUNNING OUT OF THE KITCHEN, WITH THE SIX-CHAMBERED REVOLVER IN HIS HAND. HE TOOK ONE LEAP ON TO THE TABLE.

GENTLEMEN! GENTLEMEN! PLEASE DO NOT BE HASTY!

KEEP OUTA THIS, LIMEY. THIS KRAUT CALLED ME YELLOW!

ENGLISHMAN—THIS IS MY QUARREL, MY HONOUR! DO NOT INTERFERE!



Tower of Strength

BUT PERKINS WAS NOT TO BE DENIED! HE LEAPT DOWN FEARLESSLY BETWEEN CALLAHAN AND VON STEISSEN.

AS I SEE IT--IT IS A MATTER OF HONOUR TO ALL OF YOU. BUT WHY KILL EACH OTHER TO PROVE YOUR COURAGE, GENTLEMEN? WHY NOT PROVE IT ANOTHER WAY? BY RUSSIAN ROULETTE!

RUSSIAN ROULETTE? SURE--I'VE HEARD OF THAT.



IT TOOK HARD TALKING. IT REQUIRED IRON NERVE TO TAKE A REVOLVER WITH ONE BULLET IN IT, SPIN THE CHAMBER AND THEN PULL THE TRIGGER AGAINST YOUR OWN HEAD. BUT WHEN THE TEXAN VOLUNTEERED, THE OTHERS COULD NOT BACK OUT.

I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S CHICKEN! I'LL DO IT--IF YOU GUYS WILL FOLLOW ME! WHAT DO YOU SAY?

A VON STEISSEN WILL NOT BE SHAMED BY ANY MAN!



THE DIE WAS CAST! CALLAHAN TOOK A DEEP BREATH, SPUN THE CHAMBER AND DEFIANTLY STUCK THE BARREL AGAINST HIS TEMPLE -- FOR THE FIRST ROUND OF THE DEADLY GAME OF RUSSIAN ROULETTE!



ALMOST WITH BRAVADO, HE PULLED THE TRIGGER. THERE WAS NO RESULTING CRACK OF THE BULLET. CALLAHAN HAD DRAWN A BLANK!



THE MUZZLE SEEMED COLD AND HARD AGAINST THE GERMAN'S TEMPLE. IT SEEMED A FOOLISH, STUPID WAY TO END A BRILLIANT CAREER!

HEIL
HITLER!



YET AGAIN THE HAMMER FELL, THE FIRING PIN STRUCK HARMLESSLY. THE GERMAN HAD WON THE 5 TO 1 CHANCE. ROKOVSKY STRODE FORWARD AND SNATCHED THE REVOLVER...

I WILL SHOW YOU WE
RUSSIANS KNOW HOW TO
DIE! NO SACRIFICE IS
TOO GREAT!



THE LAW OF AVERAGES WAS DEMANDING A VICTIM BY NOW. THE TENSENESS IN THE ROOM WAS SPLIT ONLY BY THE CHOKING VOICE OF COTRONIO, OVERCOME AT LAST BY HIS LATIN EMOTION.

NO, NO!
I CANNOT
STAND IT!



BUT THE LAW OF AVERAGES HAD TO WAIT ONCE MORE FOR ITS VICTIM! THE HAMMER FELL ON TO AN EMPTY CHAMBER! IT WAS COLONEL COUNT COTRONIO'S TURN AND THOUGH HIS KNEES SHOOK, HE SAVOURED THE DRAMA OF THE SITUATION. HE EVEN SPURNED CALLAHAN'S ADVANCE.



THE FATES REMAINED KIND! COTRONIO CELEBRATED HIS ESCAPE WITH A WHOOP OF JOY, FLINGING THE REVOLVER AWAY, TO BE RECOVERED BY PERKINS.



WITH THE TENSION BROKEN, THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE ROOM CHANGED VIOLENTLY. EACH OF THE COLONELS HAD VISIBLY PUT HIS COURAGE TO THE TEST AND HAD PASSED WITH FLYING COLOURS.

WHAT A PERFORMANCE!
BETTER THAN THE OPERA
IN ROMA! TO THINK ALL
OF THEM GUYS COULD BE
DEAD DUCKS NOW!

ER...YES, DEAD
DUCKS, AS YOU SAY!
COME INTO THE
KITCHEN, ENRICO.



IN THE KITCHEN, THE CALM AND COLLECTED GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN EXAMINED THE REVOLVER.

PLEASE BE
CAREFUL! IT MAY
GO OFF THIS
TIME! THERE'S
ONE BULLET
IN IT!

RELAX, ENRICO. LOOK,
IT'S EMPTY. I TOOK **ALL**
THE BULLETS OUT! I HAD
TO DO SOMETHING TO
STOP THOSE MADMEN
KILLING EACH OTHER!



Chapter 3. *Treasure Chase*

THE CELEBRATIONS WENT ON FOR ANOTHER HOUR. WITH THE ITALIAN PLATOON EXPECTED ANY MINUTE FROM BELLESSI, THERE WAS NO THOUGHT OF DANGER FROM THE BANDITS.

WE'RE GOING TO HIT THE HAY NOW, BUD. GREAT GUYS THESE-- GREAT GUYS!

YES, SIR... I AM SURE THEY ARE. I WILL TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY OF PRESSING YOUR UNIFORMS, SIR.



THE UNIFORMS WERE IN A MESS, ALL RIGHT. THE TWO SERVANTS GOT TO WORK ON THEM AS THE COLONELS FELL INTO DEEP SLUMBER.

IT IS TIME THE SOLDIERS WERE HERE! THE LAZY LAYABOUTS! FINE GUARDS THEY ARE!

NEVER MIND, ENRICO. THE BANDITS SEEM TO HAVE HAD ENOUGH.



EVEN AS PERKINS SPOKE, THERE CAME A CRACKLE OF BREAKING GLASS IN THE DINING-ROOM AS THE WINDOWS CRUMPLED BENEATH SMASHING BLOWS.

NO-ONE HERE!
SEARCH THE ROOMS.
FIND THEM! BRING
THEM TO ME!



PERKINS AND ENRICO HAD STIFFENED INTO RIGID ATTENTION. THE SOUND OF THE BANDIT LEADER'S VOICE CONFIRMED THEIR FEARS.

THE
BANDITS!

MAMA MIA!
THEY WILL KILL
US! THIS WAY!
PRONTO!



THERE WAS NO POINT IN RECKLESS DEFIANCE. PERKINS AND THE FRIGHTENED ITALIAN RACED DOWN THE STEPS THAT LED TO THE CELLARS OF THE CHATEAU.

DOWN HERE! THE
WINE CELLAR! WE
WILL BE SAFE IN
THERE!

WILL WE?
I DOUBT IT!



PERKINS WENT STRAIGHT TO THE ONLY DOOR. IT WAS LOCKED!

ENRICO! THE KEY! HAVE YOU GOT THE KEY?

THAT IS THE STRONGROOM-- WHERE THE COUNT KEEPS HIS VALUABLES. BUT HE VALUES HIS WINE MORE HIGHLY! SEE, HERE-- THE HIDDEN DOOR! THIS IS THE WINE CELLAR!



UPSTAIRS, FOUR HALF-ASLEEP OFFICERS WERE BEING HERDED UNCEREMONIOUSLY OUT OF THEIR ROOMS. IL TURCO WAS ON THE RAMPAGE!

THIS IS AN OUTRAGE! YOU ARE ITALIANS-- ALLIES OF MY COUNTRY!

SILENCE, THAT BABBLING, TEDESCO!



THE SITUATION WAS MADE EVEN WORSE BY THE HUMILIATION OF BEING CAUGHT IN THEIR UNDERWEAR!

OKAY! YOU'RE ON TOP RIGHT NOW, BUD... BUT I'M DARNED IF I'LL GO A STEP FARTHER IN MY LONG JOHNS.

LISTEN TO ME, AMICO... I AM COUNT COTRONIO... I CAN HELP YOU...

SILENCE! AMBROSIO -- GET THEIR CLOTHES. VESPUCCI... THAT MAD DRIVER IS STILL IN THE HOUSE... FIND HIM!



AS VESPUCCI LED THE SEARCH PARTY FOR PERKINS, A MIXED BAG OF UNIFORMS WAS FLUNG AT THE PRISONERS.

THIS IS NOT MY UNIFORM!

HI! I DEMAND MY OWN KIT!

YOU DEMAND? YOU DEMAND NOTHING! GET DRESSED, AMERICANO, OR ELSE...



IN THE DARKNESS OF THE WINE CELLAR, THE TWO HIDDEN MEN HEARD THE CLATTER OF THE BANDITS AS THEY SEARCHED.

W-WHAT SHALL WE DO? IF THEY FIND THE DOOR-- WE ARE CORPSES!

RESTRAIN YOURSELF, ENRICO. WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF!



THE LOCKED DOOR OF THE STRONGROOM PRESENTED NO DIFFICULTIES TO VESPUCCI. IN THE CONFINED AREA OF THE CELLAR THE SHARP CHATTER OF THE AUTOMATIC WEAPON BECAME AN EAR-SPLITTING CACOPHONY.



THE SIGHT OF THE SILVER AND PRECIOUS POSSESSIONS OF THE HOUSE OF COTRONIO DROVE ALL OTHER THOUGHTS FROM THE MINDS OF THE BANDITS!

SAPRISTI! TREASURE! AT LAST WE ARE RICH, COMRADES!



THEY RUSHED BACK TO SPILL OUT THE GOOD NEWS TO THEIR CHIEF IN THE DINING ROOM.

IL TURCO! SEE WHAT WE FOUND. **TREASURE!** WE ARE RICH! AND, MASTER--THE HOUSE IS EMPTY--THE MAD ENGLISHMAN HAS ESCAPED!

HE WILL NOT GET FAR! IT IS TIME WE DEALT WITH THESE KILLERS OF MY MEN!



THE PRISONERS, WHO HAD STRUGGLED INTO UNFAMILIAR UNIFORMS, WERE BUNDLED INTO THE COURTYARD BY THE ORDER OF IL TURCO.

RELEASE US, IL TURCO, AND I PROMISE I WILL NOT REPORT THIS TO THE AUTHORITIES.

YOU WILL NOT HAVE THE CHANCE, EXCELLENCY! BACK IN THE MOUNTAINS, I LOSE FOUR MEN. FOR THAT, I EXECUTE FOUR MEN! IT IS JUSTICE!



PERKINS HAD SILENTLY FOLLOWED THE BANDITS FROM THE CELLAR. NOW HE WATCHED THE GRIM PROCEEDINGS IN THE COURTYARD.



THE SECONDS WERE RUNNING OUT. IF EVER THERE WAS TIME FOR ACTION, IT WAS NOW!



ALMOST APOLOGETICALLY, BUT QUITE DECISIVELY, PERKINS BROUGHT THE BUTT OF THE REVOLVER DOWN ON THE TRUCK DRIVER'S HEAD...



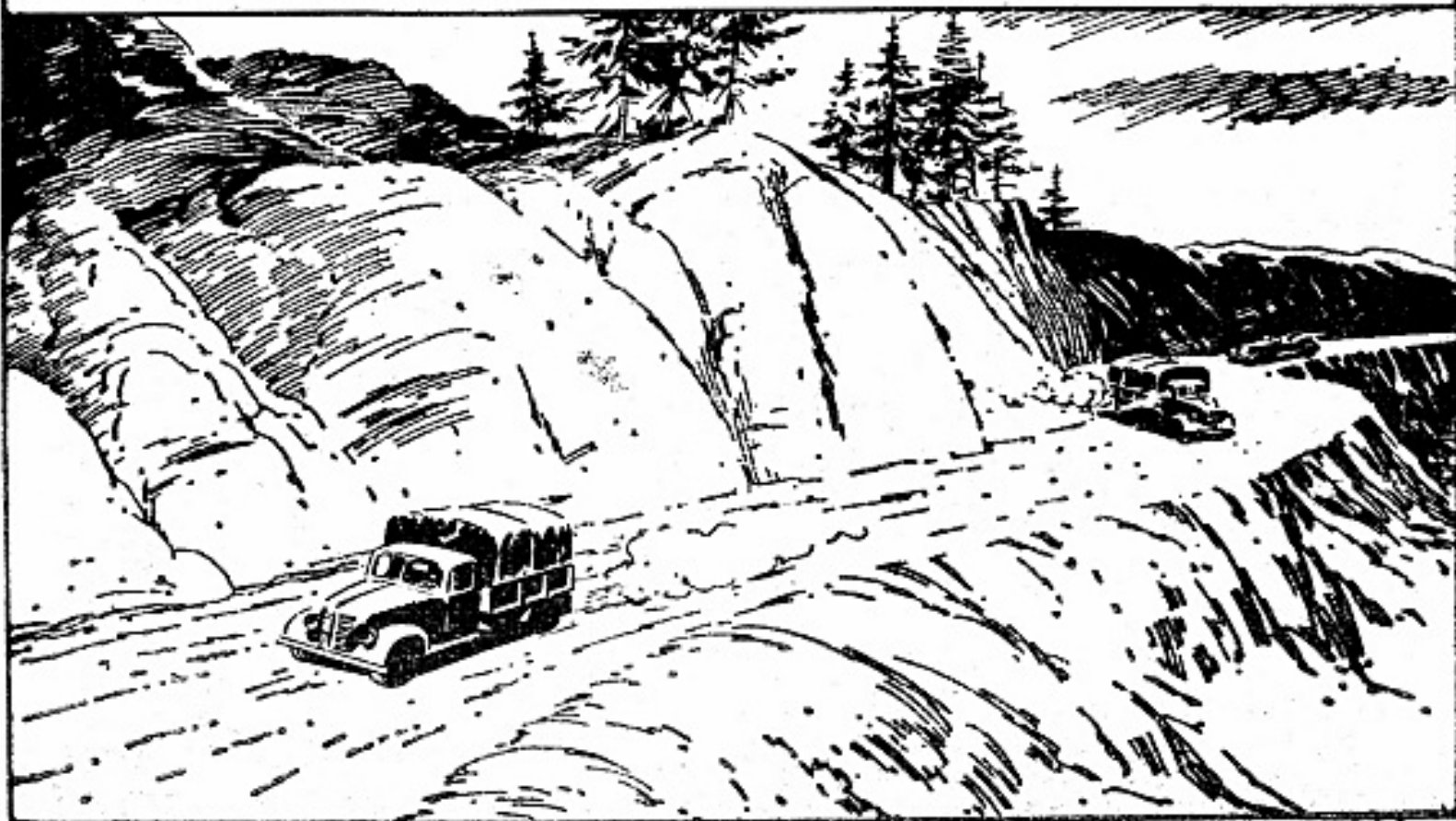
HE WAS IN THE CAB WITH THE ENGINE STARTED BEFORE HE WAS DISCOVERED. TO MAKE DOUBLY SURE, HE FIRED THE REVOLVER INTO THE AIR!

HEY!
COME AND
GET ME!

L'INGLESE!
HE IS TAKING
THE TREASURE!
AFTER HIM!



IT WAS THE START OF A WILD CHASE DOWN THE MOUNTAIN ROAD AS THE BANDITS, LEAVING ONE MAN TO GUARD THE PRISONERS, PILED INTO THE OTHER TRUCK AND STAFF CAR AND CAREERED AFTER PERKINS AND THE TREASURE.



SOME KILOMETRES AHEAD, THE PLATOON OF ITALIAN SOLDIERS, FINALLY PERSUADED TO LEAVE THE DELIGHTS OF BELLESSI BY THE POLICE, WERE ON THEIR WAY BACK TO THE CHATEAU. THEY WERE SINGING MERRILY, BLITHELY IGNORANT OF THE DRAMA BEING ENACTED AHEAD OF THEM.



THEIR SONG WAS STARTLINGLY CUT SHORT AS PERKINS, WHO HAD BEEN STEADILY GAINING ON HIS PURSUERS, SLAMMED ON THE BRAKES AND SKIDDED HIS TRUCK BROADSIDE ACROSS THE ROAD BEFORE THE SOLDIERS' VEHICLE.

THE BANDITS!
PLEASE, DON'T ARGUE!
THE BANDITS ARE
COMING! THEY HAVE
CAPTURED COUNT
COTRONIO!

**SO! GET
YOUR GUNS READY,
MY MEN!**



BY THE TIME THE BANDITS REACHED THAT POINT, THE ITALIANS WERE DEPLOYED FOR ACTION. PERKINS LEAPT FOR COVER AT THE SIDE OF THE ROAD AS THE BULLETS STARTED TO FLY.

STOP! STOP!
SOLDIERS!



IL TURCO WAS QUICK TO SIZE UP THE FACT THAT HIS MEN WERE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED, AND ROARED AT HIS DRIVER TO SWING THE STAFF CAR ROUND.

TURN ROUND!
PRONTO! BEFORE
THE SOLDIERS
GET HERE!

IL TURCO!
IF ONLY I CAN
REACH THE ROAD
IN TIME...



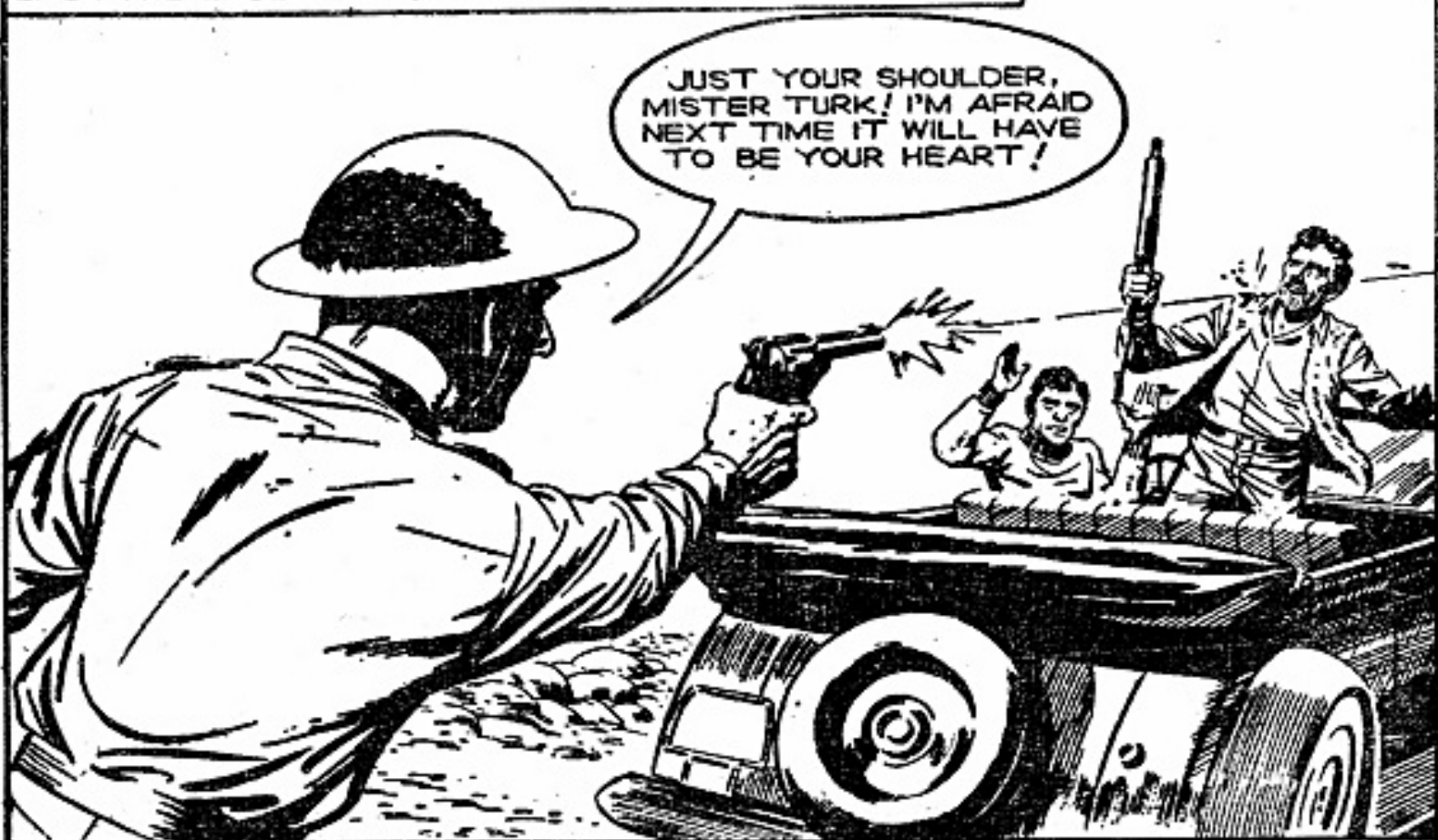
PERKINS SCRAMBLED BACK ON TO THE ROAD JUST AS THE BANDIT DRIVER SUCCEEDED IN GETTING THE STAFF CAR POINTING BACK TOWARDS THE CHATEAU.

TURCO! HALT!
STOP WHERE
YOU ARE!

L'INGLESE!
DRIVE ON...
FASTER!



THE BIG BANDIT LEADER SWUNG UP HIS GUN TO BLAST BACK THE ENGLISHMAN, BUT PERKINS FIRED FIRST ...



MEANWHILE, SOME KILOMETRES BACK ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CHATEAU, THE ROAD BLOCK WAS BEING CLEARED. MAJOR SIR FRANCIS CLAREMONT, HIS MILITARY CAREER IN JEOPARDY, WAS SWEATING IT OUT.



AFTER ESCAPING FROM THE GERMAN ATTACK, HE HAD BACK-TRACKED, DESPERATELY SEARCHING FOR PERKINS AND THE PRECIOUS RUSSIAN COLONEL.



BY THIS TIME, PERKINS HAD THE SITUATION WELL IN HAND.

I ADVISE YOU TO ORDER HIM NOT TO FIRE, MISTER TURK, OR I SHALL BE OBLIGED TO RETALIATE...
ON YOU!

PUT DOWN THAT GUN, YOU DOLT!



WITH THE GUARD DISARMED AND THE QUIVERING ENRICO, WHO HAD FINALLY EMERGED FROM HIDING, COVERING THEM, PERKINS UNFASTENED THE BONDS OF THE OFFICERS.

IT IS REGRETTABLE YOU HAVE BEEN PUT TO SUCH INCONVENIENCE, SIR. I THINK THERE WILL BE NO MORE TROUBLE NOW!

LIMEY! YOU'RE HUNDRED PERCENT! THERE'S ALWAYS A PLACE IN MY OUTFIT FOR A GUY LIKE YOU, BY GOLLY!



AT THAT MOMENT, THE ARMoured RECCE CAR CAME BLINDING UP TO THE CHATEAU, ITS GUNS COCKED AND READY FOR ANYTHING!

STAND RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE, WHOEVER YOU ARE! WE HAVE YOU COVERED!

GOOD HEAVENS! IT IS SIR FRANCIS HIMSELF!



WHEN THE SITUATION WAS EXPLAINED TO HIM, SIR FRANCIS HUGGED THE EMBARRASSED PERKINS LIKE A LONG LOST SON.

WHAT WOULD I DO WITHOUT YOU, PERKINS! LEAD ME TO THE HERO OF STALINGRAD!

PLEASE, SIR... I WAS ONLY DOING MY DUTY! OUR GUEST, THE RUSSIAN OFFICER, IS OVER HERE.



THERE WAS, NOT UNNATURALLY, SOME SLIGHT CONFUSION AT FIRST...

COLONEL ROKOVSKY, I TENDER MY APOLOGIES ON BEHALF OF MY SUPERIORS; THIS UNFORTUNATE...

PAH! I AM NOT A RUSSIAN! I AM COLONEL COUNT COTRONIO -- OF THE ROYAL ITALIAN FORCES!



TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE "ITALIAN" SPOKE WITH A RUSSIAN ACCENT. THE "GERMAN" HAD A TEXAN DRAWL, AND THE "AMERICAN" ALMOST CHOKED ON HIS GUTTURAL SPEECH.

YOU REALISE, MAJOR, I MUST REPORT THIS DISGRACEFUL INCIDENT TO MOSCOW!

TARNATION! I'LL BE CLAIMING THE PURPLE HEART FOR THIS NIGHT'S WORK!

I DEMAND SATISFACTION, FROM ANYBODY, SIR! HEIL HITLER!

GOOD GRIEF! I'VE HEARD IT ALL NOW...



Tower of Strength

THE CONFUSION WAS MADE WORSE BY THE ARRIVAL OF THE ITALIAN SOLDIERS, TRIUMPHANT WITH THEIR VICTORY OVER THE BANDITS AND COMPLETE WITH PRISONERS AND LOOT!

EYTES, SIR!
GET BACK --- AND
WE'LL MOW 'EM
DOWN!

WITH RESPECT,
SIR. ORDER THEM
NOT TO SHOOT!



PERKINS QUICKLY EXPLAINED HOW, FOR A FEW HOURS, THE WAR HAD CEASED TO EXIST IN THAT MOUNTAIN RETREAT.

IF I MAY TENDER A SUGGESTION, SIR,
I ADVISE THAT WE GO WITH THE RUSSIAN
AND AMERICAN GENTLEMEN AND LEAVE
COLONEL VON STEISSEN AND COLONEL
COUNT COTRONIO TO DEAL WITH THE
BANDITS ... AS THEY THINK FIT.

WHATEVER YOU SAY,
PERKINS -- THIS IS A
SLICE OF NO MAN'S
LAND, IN ANY CASE.



IT WAS A TOUCHING FAREWELL AS THE TWO ENEMY COLONELS AND ENRICO INSISTED ON SHAKING THE HAND OF THE BRITISH PRIVATE.



ONLY ONE MAN REMAINED HARD AND OBSTINATE, EVEN AFTER HE HAD CHANGED BACK INTO HIS OWN UNIFORM. COLONEL ROKOVSKY FELT THAT HIS DIGNITY AS A STALINGRAD VETERAN HAD BEEN DEEPLY HURT.



LOYAL TO THE HOUSE OF CLAREMONT TO THE LAST,
PERKINS CROSSED HIS FINGERS AND PLAYED THE ACE!

COLONEL, BACK
AT BASE IT IS
POSSIBLE I MAY
FIND THE
INGREDIENTS FOR
MORE PAPAZJANIJA.
AND FROM ENRICO
I GOT THIS VODKA!

PAPAZJANIJA --
AND VODKA! WITH
THAT, I SHALL BE
TOO HAPPY TO
WRITE ANY REPORT,
COMRADE!

GOOD SHOW,
PERKINS! OKAY --
LET'S GO!



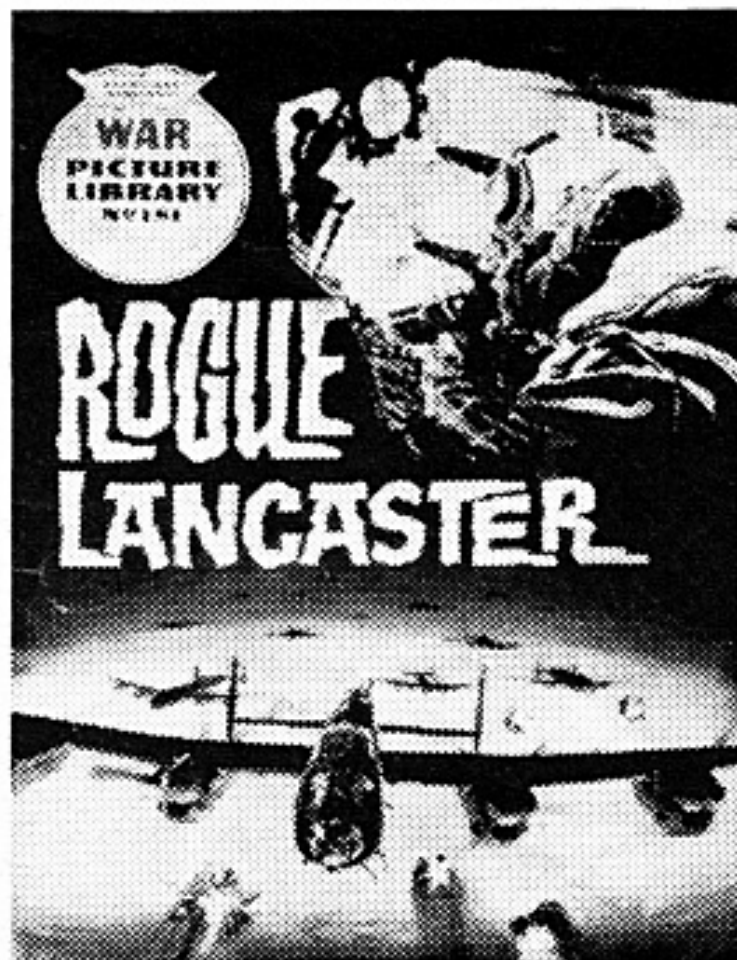
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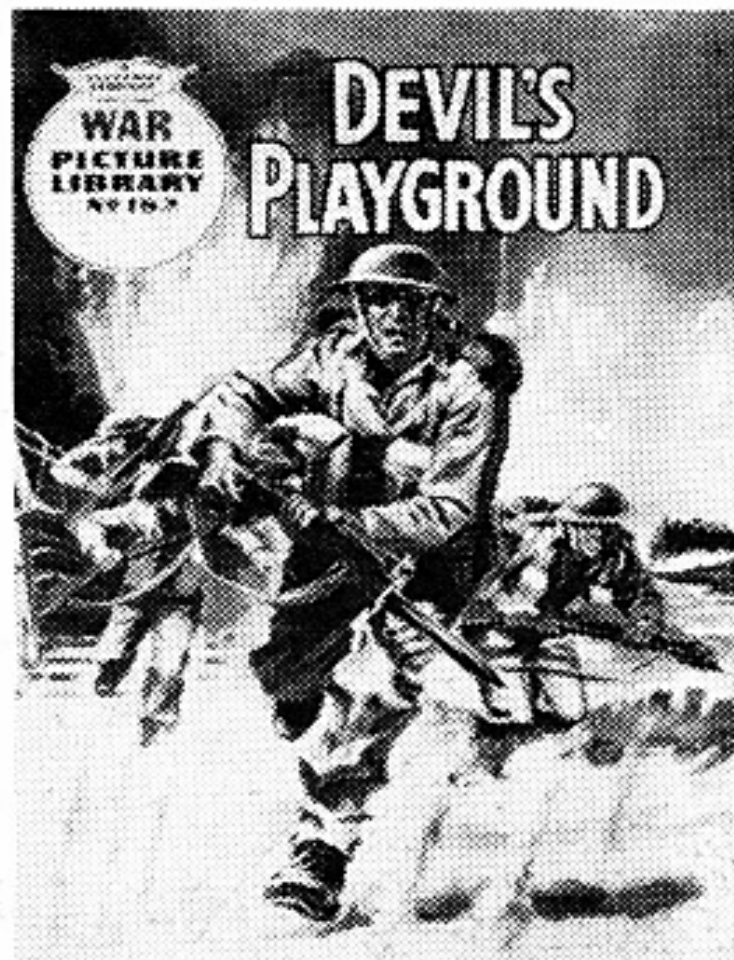
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